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Chairman: Mr. Ali ..... (Malaysia)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Saha

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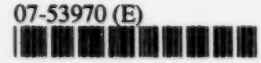


The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 131: Pattern of conferences (A/62/32, A/62/161 and Corr.1-2 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1 and A/62/473)

1. **Mr. Yaroshevich** (Chairperson of the Committee on Conferences), introducing the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2007 (A/62/32), pointed out that both the report and the draft resolution contained in annex I had been adopted by consensus. The report itself reflected the breadth of the discussion on all items, and the range of views presented was a testament to the Committee's efforts to achieve progress on some long-standing and very difficult issues.

2. Section I of the draft resolution called on the General Assembly to approve the draft biennial calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2008 and 2009 and to authorize the Committee on Conferences to make any adjustments to the calendar necessitated by actions and decisions of the General Assembly at its sixty-second session.

3. Section II A dealt with the utilization of conference-servicing resources. Members of the Committee on Conferences had engaged in extensive discussions on that topic and had noted that, while the overall utilization rate at the four main duty stations remained above the established benchmark of 80 per cent, it had decreased from 85 per cent in 2005 to 83 per cent in 2006, although the planning accuracy factor had improved by 5 per cent over the same period. He had conducted consultations with the chairpersons and secretaries of bodies that had underutilized their resources for three consecutive years with a view to finding efficient ways and means of improving the situation, taking into consideration the specificities of each body. A number of solutions had been proposed, including starting and ending meetings on time and reducing the number of meetings requested. He had proposed three options designed to address the issue of time lost owing to late starts and early endings, which were described in paragraph 21 of the report.

4. Three intergovernmental bodies that had previously underutilized conference-servicing resources had reached or surpassed the established benchmark of 80 per cent in 2006, and the body with the lowest utilization rate had reached the benchmark in 2007. Those improvements were the result, inter alia, of careful planning and ongoing dialogue with conference services. In order to further improve utilization rates, a three-pronged approach had been suggested: first, the Chairperson of the Committee on Conferences should continue to hold consultations with chairpersons, particularly incoming chairpersons; second, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management should pursue its proactive approach at the planning stage; and, third, intergovernmental bodies should, to the extent possible, be more realistic in their requests for conference services.

5. Turning to the provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, he said that the percentage of meetings provided with such services had decreased from 87 per cent in 2005 to 76 per cent in 2006. In view of the concerns expressed about the difficulties experienced by Member States owing to the lack of conference services, intergovernmental bodies had once again been urged to spare no effort at the planning stage to take into account the meetings of regional and other major groupings. The draft resolution also requested the Secretary-General to continue to explore innovative ways to address the problem.

6. The Committee had noted with satisfaction that, in 2006, all meetings of Nairobi-based United Nations bodies had taken place in Nairobi, and had welcomed the increased promotional activities undertaken by the management of the United Nations Conference Centre at the Economic Commission for Africa, which had resulted in a marked increase in the utilization rate (from 42 per cent in 2005 to 75 per cent as at the end of May 2007). The cooperation agreements on conference services concluded between the Economic Commission for Africa and various other United Nations offices were another welcome development.

7. Section II B of the draft resolution dealt with the impact of the capital master plan on meetings held at Headquarters during its implementation and bodies meeting there were requested to take into consideration the limitations and inflexibility of conference facilities during the renovations and to liaise closely with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management when scheduling meetings. The Secretary-General was also requested to ensure that the temporary relocation of a part of the conference-servicing staff and information technology resources of

the aforementioned Department to a swing space would not compromise the quality of conference services and that all language services would be treated equally.

8. Section III of the draft resolution addressed the issue of integrated global management. While noting with appreciation the initiatives undertaken to streamline procedures and achieve economies of scale, the Committee on Conferences had stressed the importance of ensuring equal treatment of conference-servicing staff as well as the principle of equal grade for equal work at the four duty stations. In the draft resolution the Secretary-General was requested to continue to explore best practices and techniques in client satisfaction evaluations and to ensure that administrative policies, practices and procedures developed as a result of the work of the integrated global management task forces should be in full compliance with relevant General Assembly resolutions.

9. With regard to documentation and publication-related matters, the familiar concerns regarding the importance of maintaining the equality of the six official languages and the late issuance of documentation had been raised. The draft resolution stressed the importance of the concordance principle in order to ensure that texts of resolutions were equally valid in all six languages.

10. The final section (section V) of the draft resolution dealt with translation and interpretation-related matters. Inter alia, the Office of Internal Oversight Services was requested to conduct a comprehensive review of the existing special arrangements governing the recruitment of temporary assistance staff in language services at the four major duty stations.

11. The Committee on Conferences had again expressed concern about the appropriate level of self-revision and the high vacancy rates in Nairobi. In paragraph 7 of section V of the draft resolution the Secretary-General was requested to consider further measures aimed at decreasing the vacancy rates in Nairobi as an exceptional case.

12. Training and mobility and their implications for the quality of conference services had been the theme of the Committee's traditional videoconference with other duty stations, each of which had described the steps taken to deal with the challenges posed by the demographic shift and the potential effects of the mobility policy. In the draft resolution, the Secretary-General was requested to continue to address the issue of succession planning by enhancing internal and external training programmes, developing staff exchange programmes between organizations and participating in outreach activities to international institutions.

13. The Secretary-General was also requested to enhance translation quality in all official languages, in particular for contractual translation, and to report to the General Assembly at its sixty-third session on the experience, lessons learned and best practices of all main duty stations in performing quality control of contractual translations, including on the requirements of numbers and appropriate level of the staff needed to carry out that function. The Committee on Conferences had taken note of the performance measurement matrix proposed by the Secretary-General and was looking forward to receiving the indicators for all duty stations starting in 2008. Lastly, the Committee had noted the information provided on the impact of freelance recruitment on the quality of interpretation at all duty stations and welcomed the measures proposed in that regard.

14. **Mr. Shaaban** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on pattern of conferences (A/62/161 and Corr.1-2 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1), said that, as a relative newcomer to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, he had been impressed by the way in which it was able to deliver on the exacting goals of reform while remaining fully aware of the intrinsic contradiction between the simultaneous demands of improved quality and fiscal austerity. Although the Department intended to manage its resources wisely, it could not enhance the quality of its services without an appropriate strengthening of its staffing table. In that connection, and taking account of the Fifth Committee's concerns, the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009 contained a request for seven P-5 posts at Headquarters to provide quality control for contractual translation. Similar requests had been made for Geneva and Vienna. Quality control of external translation was an ongoing process and dedicated permanent capacity was required for that purpose.

15. Over the years, budget cuts had led to lean, incongruous staffing tables and concomitant anomalies

in the grading structure of several language units. Those anomalies undermined the principle of equality of all six official languages and equal grade for equal work. In addition, they had an adverse effect on the morale of staff in the units concerned and should be addressed without delay.

16. The Department would face two major challenges in the years ahead. First, the need for adequate succession planning in view of the number of projected retirements. According to data from the Office of Human Resources Management, 40 per cent of staff at the D-1 and D-2 levels and around 26 per cent of staff at the P-5 level would leave the Organization in the forthcoming five years. Since 80 per cent of the Department's staff were recruited by means of competitive examinations, the Office of Human Resources Management would need additional human and financial resources to cope with the increase in such examinations. Urgent steps should also be taken to expedite the recruitment process, which currently took between six and nine months.

17. Second, all new recruits would require training. Given the anticipated scale of the recruitment operation, the Department's output would probably be affected because new staff would be less productive and more experienced staff would be called upon to conduct training activities. To date, a lack of adequate resources had prevented the Department from institutionalizing a culture of continuous training. In order to rectify that problem, a number of initiatives had been introduced, including the assignment of senior staff to training functions and the appointment of a temporary training coordination officer. In that connection, there were many advantages to cooperating with other United Nations system organizations, as well as bodies that participated in the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications. In November 2007, as part of the Department's efforts to ensure that its conference-servicing operations were more accurately benchmarked against those of other multilateral organizations, managers from all four major duty stations would participate in a study visit to the European Union in Brussels.

18. While such initiatives came at a cost, they were essential if training was to be accorded the importance it deserved in a modern, knowledge-based organization. If the issues of recruitment and training were not addressed in a scientific and sustained manner, the United Nations would lack the highly professional and efficient language staff it needed for its smooth functioning.

19. Turning to the question of information technology, he said that the Department was currently implementing two projects as part of its efforts to introduce integrated global management and strengthen interdepartmental cooperation. The first of those, aimed at enhancing the Official Document System (ODS), was being implemented in cooperation with the Department of Public Information and the Department of Management, and the second, a global information technology project, was designed to harmonize and coordinate information technology activities, processes and business practices across the four main duty stations.

20. The global information technology project was currently being coordinated by the Information Management and Technology Unit at Headquarters. Unfortunately, the Unit continued to be severely understaffed, a situation that would be compounded by the relocation of over half of its staff during the implementation of the capital master plan. While the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009 recognized to some extent the need to strengthen the Unit, two additional P-3 posts would be essential to ensure an adequate staffing table. In addition, an upgrade of existing information technology equipment would be required in order to cater to the needs of a Department that, during the implementation of the capital master plan, would be working in five separate locations.

21. With regard to the recurrent theme of the provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, he said that in 2007 the Department had decided to add a strategic reserve of three additional meetings per week, on the understanding that, if those resources were not used by the calendar bodies, they would be allocated to meetings of regional and other major groupings. While the percentage of requests granted had not changed significantly, the number of meetings with interpretation services had continued to increase. Nevertheless, it was a matter of some concern that, between January and May 2007, 20 per cent of the requests submitted by bodies entitled to meet "as required" had not been granted. Careful management of the calendar of conferences and an increase in the weekly reserve capacity were essential to improve the

situation. However, short of increasing resources or changing its mandate, the Department had run out of imaginative solutions in that area.

22. In terms of planning and coordination, document management was perhaps the most complex operation carried out by the Department. In order to enhance its effectiveness in that sphere, the Department had instituted various mechanisms, including the slotting system and waiver management, which had led to some improvements in terms of timely submission. However, since the slotting system covered only around half of the total volume of documentation processed by the Department, it was impossible to predict the exact workload. Accordingly, an element of risk was inherent in forecasting and capacity planning activities. The Secretary-General's report set out a number of measures designed to improve those activities, as well as measures to control and limit the overall volume of documentation. Endorsement of those measures would contribute significantly to improving the timely processing of both slotted and unslotted documents.

23. In his report, the Secretary-General had also included details of the Department's performance measurement matrix. Information on the new array of indicators for Headquarters had been submitted to the Committee on Conferences in September 2007. While some of those measures would need to be refined further, the proposed methodology provided a broader, multifaceted picture of the overall performance of the Department. Starting in 2008, indicators for all four duty stations would be provided in an annex to the annual report on the pattern of conferences.

24. Although there had been some progress in the area of integrated global management, including the development and subsequent distribution, at the request of Member States, of the compendium of administrative policies, practices and procedures, further efforts were needed. To that end, the four duty stations must work together to harmonize their policies, practices and procedures in order to streamline their operations and avoid duplication of work.

25. In closing, he said that the Department was determined to continue to strive for excellence and to implement the reform measures set out in relevant General Assembly resolutions. However, external factors beyond its control frequently had a considerable impact on the efficient utilization of its resources. The explicit endorsement by Member States of the Department's approach to conference management and their acknowledgement of some of the dilemmas it faced were therefore of the essence.

26. **Mr. Saha** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the related report of the Advisory Committee (A/62/473), said that, since many of the issues highlighted in the Secretary-General's report had also been the subject of discussion during the Advisory Committee's deliberations on the estimates under section 2 of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009, its report on the pattern of conferences should be read in conjunction with its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009 (A/62/7).

27. The Advisory Committee welcomed the recent initiatives to promote integrated global management, including the adoption of a compendium of administrative policies, practices and procedures and plans for the implementation of a common roster of outside contractors. As far as documentation was concerned, it was recommending approval of the measures set out in paragraph 77 of the Secretary-General's report, which were intended to address a number of problems in that area.

28. With more than 20 per cent of all staff on established language posts due to retire between 2007 and 2011, the need for adequate succession planning within the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management was acute. The ability of the Department, in cooperation with the Office of Human Resources Management, to hold a sufficient number of competitive examinations for language posts would be essential in that regard. The Advisory Committee therefore urged both those entities to agree on measures aimed at ensuring the prompt organization and scheduling of the necessary examinations in the coming biennium and recommended that the General Assembly should request the Secretary-General to submit proposals for handling succession planning in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, and assigning responsibility in that regard, in the context of his next reports on the pattern of conferences and human resources management.

29. **Ms. Mesquita** (Portugal), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the candidate countries Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and

Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia; and, in addition, Armenia, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, said that the provision of effective conference services through the timely issuance of documentation, high standards in language services and adequate meeting facilities was essential to the success of the work of intergovernmental and expert bodies of the United Nations. At the same time, since conference management consumed a large share of regular budget resources, effectiveness, efficiency, accuracy, quality and consistency in all official languages were a concern.

30. The European Union welcomed the progress achieved across all duty stations in many of the reform areas of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. In particular, it welcomed the initiatives undertaken in the context of integrated global management aimed at streamlining procedures, achieving economies of scale and improving the quality of conference services. The European Union encouraged the Department to actively take forward all reform initiatives. It welcomed the draft resolution proposed by the Committee on Conferences and was willing to endorse it as a package.

31. **Mr. Farooq** (Pakistan), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that the recommendations contained in the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2007 (A/62/32) would greatly facilitate the Fifth Committee's consideration of the item and that the draft resolution on the pattern of conferences submitted by the Committee on Conferences would provide a sound basis for the Fifth Committee's work.

32. The Group noted with concern that, although the overall utilization of conference services had remained above the established benchmark of 80 per cent, it had decreased from 85 per cent in 2005 to 83 per cent in 2006 in all but one duty station. It hoped that improved coordination between planning officers and technical secretariats would lead to a further rise in the overall utilization factor in 2008. It noted with satisfaction the utilization rate of 100 per cent recorded in Nairobi and the marked increase from 42.23 per cent in 2005 to the current rate of 60.13 per cent recorded by the United Nations Conference Centre at the Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa. The Conference Centre needed to continue to explore means of further enhancing its conference utilization, bearing in mind the minimum operating security standards.

33. It should be remembered that each hour of fully serviced conference time cost the Organization thousands of dollars; meetings should therefore be conducted punctually. Adequate budgetary resources were needed to facilitate the consideration of important issues by the Fifth Committee, meetings of which often lasted many hours. With respect to the reports and summary records of the meetings of intergovernmental bodies, the primary aim was to communicate and preserve information efficiently, not to cut costs. Cost-cutting could adversely affect the quality of reports and summary records.

34. In its resolution 61/236, the General Assembly had recognized the importance of the meetings of regional groupings; it had also recognized that the provision of interpretation was necessary for the smooth functioning of those meetings. The Group was deeply concerned that the percentage of such meetings provided with interpretation had fallen from 87 per cent in 2005 to 77 per cent in 2006. With an adequate allocation of resources, it should be possible to achieve the level of 98 per cent reached during the period May 2001 to April 2002.

35. The Group was in favour of equitable treatment for all duty stations and all the official languages of the United Nations. It had taken note that, according to the information provided in the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/62/161), around 25 per cent of the United Nations language staff would retire in the next five years. While the course of action recommended in the report was a step in the right direction, the Group would welcome more detailed information on the number of vacancies at each duty station and in each language section and on the development of strategies to deal with the issue in the long term.

36. The consideration of issues by intergovernmental bodies depended heavily on the quality and accuracy of translation and interpretation. However, the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences stated that internal capacity to ensure appropriate quality control of external translations had been inadequate at all duty stations. If quality control could not be guaranteed, outsourcing of translation services might not be a fully viable option.

37. The perennial problem of the late issuance of documentation adversely affected the intergovernmental consideration of related items and the consideration of reports by smaller delegations in particular. The Secretary-General's report on the pattern of conferences stated that delays in issuance were due to lack of proper planning and timing; however, only 8 per cent of the documents slotted for the second half of 2007 were beyond the Secretariat's control. With regard to the timely submission by Member States of inputs to reports of the Secretary-General, the Group reiterated the prerogative of Member States and intergovernmental bodies to decide the length and timing for the submission of those inputs.

38. The Group had taken note of the outcome of the work of the integrated global management task forces and requested the Secretary-General to ensure that administrative policies, practices and procedures of conference services developed on the basis of the recommendations of the task forces were in full compliance with relevant General Assembly resolutions.

39. With respect to the capital master plan, the bodies holding meetings during the construction period needed to bear in mind the scarcity of conference space. The Group encouraged all bodies wishing to hold meetings at Headquarters to liaise with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to facilitate more efficient conference management during the construction period. The Group would also appreciate further information concerning the probable impact of the accelerated strategy IV of the capital master plan on conference management in New York.

40. **Mr. Afifi** (Egypt), speaking on behalf of the African Group, said that the Group was pleased that the utilization of conference services had reached 100 per cent in Nairobi and 60.13 per cent at the United Nations Conference Centre at the Economic Commission for Africa. It was concerned, however, that overall utilization of conference services had fallen from 85 per cent in 2005 to 83 per cent in 2006.

41. In its resolution 60/236 B, the General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to explore innovative ways to improve the provision of services to meetings of regional and other major groupings and to report to the General Assembly through the Committee on Conferences. The Group remained concerned that interpretation services were being provided to those meetings only on an ad hoc or "as required" basis and that the provision of interpretation depended largely on cancellations of meetings by calendar bodies. That was clearly not a durable solution, given that the General Assembly had requested calendar bodies to improve their utilization factor. The Group was also concerned about indications that the actual percentage of the meetings of regional groupings provided with interpretation remained well below the levels achieved five years earlier.

42. In its resolution 61/236, the General Assembly had requested the Committee on Conferences to constantly review the impact of the capital master plan on the activities of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. The Group welcomed the inclusion in the Secretary-General's report of information on the impact of the plan, but looked forward to receiving further information on the subject as a result of the proposed accelerated approach. It reiterated that any approach should not compromise the quality of conference management and services.

43. The late issuance of documents remained a chronic problem that negatively affected the legislative process. While the Group recognized that the overall responsibility for resolving the problem lay with the Department, it urged the Secretary-General to hold author departments accountable for the late submission of documents. Late submission ultimately undermined the Department's ability to comply with the six-week rule.

44. Recalling the guidelines regarding page limits set by the General Assembly in its resolutions 52/214 and 57/283, the Group reiterated that they should be implemented with some flexibility, without adversely affecting either the quality of the presentation or the substantive content of the documents.

45. The Group remained concerned about the vacancy situation in language sections at different duty stations, particularly in Nairobi, where the Arabic interpretation section had had a high vacancy rate since its establishment. The Group would appreciate every effort made by the Secretariat to recruit new interpreters and looked forward to receiving further information on the overall vacancy situation during informal consultations.

46. In its resolution 61/236, the General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to provide at all duty stations the adequate staff and grade level with a view to ensuring appropriate quality control for external translations. The Group regretted that that quality control was lacking and stressed that cost savings should not be pursued at the expense of quality, timeliness and efficiency.

47. **Mr. Shen** Yanjie (China) said that his delegation appreciated the efforts made by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to enhance the utilization of conference-servicing resources. It had taken note of the assertion that certain factors were beyond the control of the Secretariat and commended the Department for its efforts to address those factors.

48. Regarding the issue of the forthcoming retirement of language staff and succession planning, he said that it was essential to develop the skills of existing staff as well as to enhance internal and external training programmes for new staff.

49. He noted that, at the first round of informational meetings in April 2007, delegations had expressed satisfaction with the quality of language services overall. The feedback provided at such informational meetings would help the language staff to improve their services.

50. Lastly, he appreciated the Department's efforts to ensure that the implementation of the capital master plan did not compromise the quality of conference services provided to Member States and to guarantee the equal treatment of the language services.

51. **Mr. Ibsen** (United States of America) said that his delegation encouraged Member States to consider carefully the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2007 (A/62/32) and the recommendations therein, in order to avoid a protracted debate on the issue.

52. His delegation appreciated the Department's ongoing efforts to reform itself in a manner that maximized both efficiency and cost-effectiveness, without compromising the quality of its services. It had specifically taken note of the high utilization rate across the four main duty stations, the increased emphasis on accountability in regard to the timely submission, processing and issuance of documentation and the Department's stated emphasis on strengthening its technological applications. It encouraged the Department to continue to implement similar measures, with a view to achieving further efficiencies.

53. His delegation had noted that the overall utilization rate at the United Nations duty stations had remained above the established benchmark of 80 per cent and that one of the four main duty stations had achieved a utilization rate of 100 per cent. It had also noted that the planning accuracy factor had improved by 5 per cent over the 2005 reporting period and that the overall time lost owing to late starts and early endings had decreased. That was particularly encouraging, since his delegation was of the view that the loss of resources resulting from late starts, early endings and cancellations could largely be avoided if the chairpersons of the various committees communicated effectively with the Department.

54. He commended the Department for continuing to service a large number of meetings held by bodies that were not entitled to meet "as required". The Department must, however, ensure that the meetings of those bodies that met "as required" took priority, when deciding on the allocation of services.

55. His delegation largely supported the Department's efforts to develop and implement its global information technology initiative, as new technologies could greatly improve interoperability across the four duty stations and the effective and efficient delivery of conference services. While it understood that there had been some delays in the implementation of the initiative, it encouraged the Department to remain focused on developing new technologies.

56. Lastly, his delegation recognized that the provision of conference services was an integral part of an effective and functioning Organization. However, with a budget for the biennium 2006-2007 of nearly $590 million, it was imperative for Member States to encourage the Department to enhance efficiency so that the provision of its resources was executed as cost-effectively as possible.

57. **Mr. Diab** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the agenda item on the pattern of conferences and the report of the Committee on Conferences provided the Member States with an important opportunity to examine the provision of conference services at the Organization's four main duty stations, particularly the provision of documentation and interpretation in the six official languages.

58. Recognizing that the timely issuance of documents affected the efficiency of all deliberations, he regretted the Secretariat's inconsistent compliance with the six-week rule, despite the repeatedly expressed wishes of the General Assembly and the establishment, in 2006, of an accountability mechanism for the submission, processing and issuance of documents. The principle of timely issuance, simultaneously in all the official languages, must also apply to the Internet. Recalling that the intergovernmental machinery relied on regional and other major groupings of Member States, he urged the Department to explore ways to ensure that meetings of those groups were provided with interpretation, even though the General Assembly had failed to provide a predictable flow of resources for that purpose.

59. As one of the main duty stations, the United Nations Office at Nairobi should receive equal treatment. He therefore welcomed the confirmation that all Nairobi-based bodies strictly adhered to the rule outlined in resolution 57/283 B that all of their meetings should take place in Nairobi, and that all of their meetings in 2006 had in fact been held there resulting in a high rate of utilization. The Department's efforts to fill long-standing vacancies for Arabic interpreters in Nairobi were positive, but had so far only provided temporary solutions. Also positive were the efforts to establish contact, through the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, with teaching establishments in the Arab world, to make it easier to fill vacancies for language staff in the future.

60. With regard to quality, interpreters and translators should communicate with each other to make sure that they used the most up-to-date terminology in their respective languages. The Department should remember that the aim of the compendium of administrative policies, practices and procedures, a product of the work of the Department's integrated global management task forces, was to identify approaches common to the four main duty stations, taking account of the language services' specificities, and to improve quality and efficiency. The compendium, and any future version of it, must comply strictly with General Assembly mandates. The quality of the Department's services to Member States should not suffer during the implementation of the capital master plan at Headquarters, and all language services should receive equal resources to cope with its effects.

61. **Mr. Golovinov** (Russian Federation) said that the Committee on Conferences played an important role in ensuring that the Organization's meetings were conducted efficiently and that problems which arose in that regard were addressed. The report and draft resolution of the Committee on Conferences would facilitate the deliberations of the Fifth Committee on the pattern of conferences.

62. Recalling that the main aim of the Department's ongoing reform was to improve the quality of the services provided to Member States in all of the official languages, he said that a very cautious approach should be taken to changing the working methods of the language services, which were unique in character. Moreover, maintenance of quality depended heavily on all language services enjoying equally favourable working conditions and access to human and financial resources, in line with General Assembly resolution 61/266 on multilingualism. The success of the integrated global management project would be judged by its ability to achieve a balanced division of labour between duty stations. The Department should play a coordinating role and ensure that the potential of each duty station was utilized most effectively.

63. Although his delegation doubted that the Fifth Committee would have the time to examine the compendium of administrative policies, practices and procedures in detail, it emphasized that the policies, practices and procedures it described must comply fully with the resolutions of the General Assembly. It expected the work of the Department's integrated global management task forces to facilitate a rapid response to important issues including the posting of official documents on the United Nations website, the introduction of more user-friendly new technologies in all the official languages of the Organization and the unification of United Nations terminology on the basis of up-to-date grammatical and stylistic usage in each language.

64. His delegation regretted the continued and frequent violation of the rule requiring the simultaneous distribution of official documents in the six official languages, reiterated by the General Assembly in numerous resolutions. Recalling that the opinion of Member States was an important barometer of the quality of conference services, it urged the Department to continue developing an integrated way of seeking routine feedback. Member States must be

given equal opportunities to provide their views, in accordance with resolutions of the General Assembly. Some progress had been made in that regard, and the twice-yearly informational meetings were a positive step which enabled delegations to explore any problems in further detail and gave the Secretariat a first-hand report from its target audience. Once those meetings had taken place, however, the Department should take specific action to address the issues raised by the Member States and to reflect any complaints in its own assessments of service quality. As in the past, his delegation was concerned about the quality of interpretation from Russian into the other official languages. Steps must be taken to ensure that the capital master plan did not adversely affect either the quality of conference services or the equal treatment of individual language services.

65. His delegation supported the Department's initiative to expand contacts with language-teaching institutions in the countries which used the Organization's official languages in order to provide a pool of qualified staff and to raise the profile of employment in the Organization. Outreach should be part of a well thought-out strategy for the planning of competitive examinations to fill vacancies in the language services.

66. **Mr. Berti Oliva** (Cuba) said that, having examined the documents before the Committee and having heard from the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management that no further options had been identified, his delegation had concluded that the best long-term solution to providing interpretation for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States was to make a suitable allocation of resources.

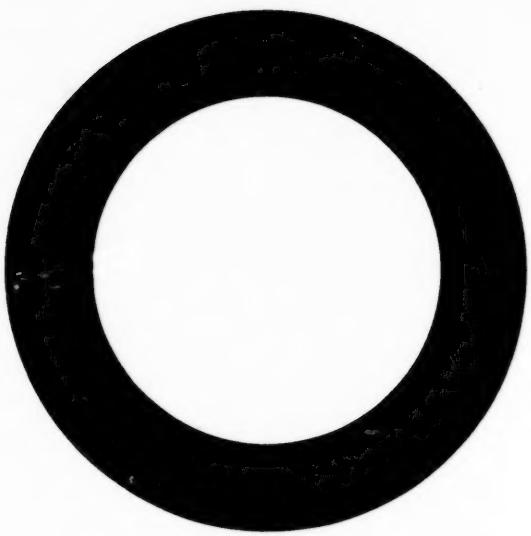
67. While it welcomed the Department's efforts to improve the issuance of documentation by establishing an accountability mechanism, it emphasized that the mechanism must look beyond the Secretariat, and make the Department accountable to the Member States, as the end-users of its services. With regard to the Department's conclusion that 8 per cent of the documents slotted for the second half of 2007 had been to some extent beyond the control of the Secretariat, being mostly submissions from Member States, he said that the effect of that category of documents on the timely submission of documentation had been discussed in the past, and that the solutions proposed had not found favour with the General Assembly. Accordingly, the Department should seek imaginative ways to improve the timely issuance of documentation in conformity with the six-week rule.

68. **Mr. Shaaban** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management), responding to the concerns expressed regarding the timely issuance of documentation, said that, while several delegations had referred to the six-week rule, not one had referred to the 10-4-6 rule, also established by the General Assembly, which indicated when the Department must receive manuscripts for translation in order to ensure issuance at the six-week mark.

69. Turning to the prerogative of Member States to determine the number of pages in reports, he indicated that such decisions had genuine consequences. For example, the First Committee had found itself unable to consider one of its documents, a questionnaire to the Member States, because of its sheer length. The responses from some Member States had been a single page long, while others had totalled 20 pages. The Secretariat's attempts to obtain a summary from capitals had proved fruitless. The matter required close cooperation between the Department and the Member States.

70. High-quality conference services could only be obtained at a cost. Mindful of the need to maintain quality and replace retirees, the Department had continued its outreach efforts to teaching institutions in order to attract their graduates. Unfortunately, United Nations salary levels were not competitive with those of other international organizations, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and the European Union institutions, or indeed with Governments or non-governmental organizations. That was illustrated by the future plans of the University of Geneva's School of Translation and Interpretation, which was likely to send five successive years of graduates to work for the European Union institutions. Training within the Organization must be built up, as it was the only viable solution.

The meeting rose at 11.45 a.m.



United Nations A/C.5/62/SR.6

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Summary record of the 6th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 16 October 2007, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Ali ..... (Malaysia)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Saha

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07-54206 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 127: Programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007

Standards of accommodation for air travel (A/61/188 and Corr.1, A/61/661, A/61/801 and A/62/351)

Contingent liability reserve for the United Nations Postal Administration (A/61/900 and A/62/350)

1. **Ms. Hurtz-Soyka** (Chief of the Office for Oversight and Internal Justice, Department of Management), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on standards of accommodation for air travel (A/61/188 and Corr.1), said that the report, the second to have been issued in response to General Assembly resolution 57/589, provided detailed information on the exceptions authorized by the Secretary-General to the normal standards of accommodation and a fuller analysis by source of funding of the additional costs incurred thereby. There had been an overall decrease in the total number of exceptions granted (217 in the two-year period ended 30 June 2006 as against 236 in the preceding period) and in the number of exceptions for first-class travel (77 as against 98), reflecting the efforts to apply tighter criteria to the granting of requests. The Secretariat would continue to exercise close oversight of the granting of exceptions.

2. **Mr. Herman** (Senior Adviser on Information Management Policy Coordination to the Chief Executives Board for Coordination), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on review of the standards of travel and entitlement for staff members, members of organs and subsidiary organs of the United Nations and entities of the United Nations system (A/61/801), said that report constituted the initial phase of the review requested in General Assembly resolution 60/255. In the light of feedback from the Committee the inter-agency bodies would formulate recommendations and measures to improve the harmonization of travel policies. The report built on a similar exercise conducted by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) (A/60/78) and reviewed the extent to which the organizations were moving towards harmonization of standards and towards establishing a baseline for further efforts. By and large, such harmonization had proved elusive: for example, the key indicator of the threshold for the use of business class continued to differ across the system. The organizations had, however, moved towards greater coherence in some areas, in differentiating, for example, between staff members above and below the D-2 level. There was also convergence towards the practice of offering lump-sum payments for many categories of travel entitlement, which simplified administrative procedures. The travel rules for representatives of Member States continued to differ across organizations.

3. **Mr. Saha** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) on standards of accommodation for air travel (A/61/661), said that it had been prepared in the light of the information presented by the Secretary-General for the two-year period ended 30 June 2006. The Advisory Committee was of the view that there was a need for careful scrutiny of exceptions to the standards of accommodation for air travel and recommended that the General Assembly should request an audit by the Office of Internal Oversight Services of all categories of exception. It was also of the view that first-class travel should be limited to the President of the General Assembly and the Secretary-General and that the Assembly might wish to consider a revision of the policy stated in its resolution 42/214.

4. Turning to the ACABQ report (A/62/351) on the report of the Secretary-General on reviews of the standards of travel and entitlement (A/61/801), he said that the Advisory Committee considered that the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) had not fully responded to the mandate contained in resolution 60/255: the report presented a compilation of data resulting from a survey without indicating any action taken or proposed and did not make any proposals for the adoption of a common policy to better harmonize the conditions of travel at the level of the United Nations system. The Secretary-General should therefore be requested to submit a comprehensive report, on the basis of a CEB review, and specific proposals with a view to harmonizing the conditions of travel throughout the system. That report should further indicate the measures which could be implemented under the authority of the Secretary-General and those which would require the approval of the General Assembly. It should also take into account the study of the International Civil Service

Commission on the subject and the recommendations of JIU, ACABQ and the General Assembly.

5. **Ms. Nowlan** (Chief of Service III, Programme Planning and Budget Division), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on a contingent liability reserve for the United Nations Postal Administration (UNPA) (A/61/900), said that the report provided additional information on options for reducing the risk posed to UNPA by use of its commercial and bulk-mail services other than the establishment of a contingent liability reserve. It was estimated that some 87 per cent of UNPA income over the past 20 years constituted a contingent liability. The Secretary-General's proposals for the establishment of a reserve were in line with the recommendation made by the United Nations Board of Auditors in its report (A/61/5, Vol. I). The continuing efforts of UNPA to obtain further discounts on mail charges from the postal authorities of the United States, Austria and Switzerland were described in paragraphs 14 to 16 of the Secretary-General's report; the two options for risk reduction were set out in paragraphs 17 and 19, and the action required by the General Assembly in paragraph 23.

6. **Mr. Saha** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the Advisory Committee's report on a contingent liability reserve for the United Nations Postal Administration (A/62/350), said that the Advisory Committee reiterated the view as to the merits of creating such a reserve expressed in paragraph 8 of its previous report on the question (A/61/480). However, it considered that the level of the reserve should be looked into by the Board of Auditors in the light of the recent developments indicated in the Secretary-General's report and the projections of income and expenditure shown in the annex to the previous ACABQ report.

7. **Mr. Hussain** (Pakistan), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that the Group agreed that the Secretary-General should be accorded discretion with regard to standards of accommodation for air travel; it also supported the Advisory Committee's view that all requests for exceptions must be carefully scrutinized. Developments in the air-travel industry and the resulting improvements in aircraft comfort should also be taken into account. In view of the lack of a common policy in the United Nations system on standards of accommodation and staff entitlements, the Group fully endorsed the ACABQ recommendations on the Secretary-General's role on the issue in the CEB framework and looked forward to the requested comprehensive report.

8. With regard to the Secretary-General's proposal for the establishment of a contingent liability reserve for UNPA, the Group underlined the importance of ensuring a net profit by means of cost-cutting, operational changes and the introduction of new products. It accepted the merits of establishing such a reserve, a move which might also be necessary in order to meet the requirements of the International Public Sector Accounting Standards.

The meeting rose at 10.25 a.m.